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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001605

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SUBJECT: PM RAJAPAKSE ASSURES AMBASSADOR ELECTORAL PACT  
WITH JVP "JUST WORDS," COMMITMENT TO PEACE PROCESS NOT IN  
QUESTION

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. PM Rajapakse describes his pact with the JVP, which reads as an utter renunciation of the peace process and economic reform, as "just words" and assures the Ambassador of his commitment to peace and his ability to use and control the JVP. We will continue to make the point that even in the heat of an electoral campaign, words matter. Rajapakse described anti-conversion legislation as "dead." End Summary

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM (notetaker), called on Prime Minister (and Sri Lanka Freedom Party - SLFP- Presidential candidate) Mahinda Rajapakse September 12. The Ambassador noted that he had just returned to Sri Lanka after five weeks and conveyed condolences on the assassination of former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and expressed appreciation for Sri Lanka's gestures of support in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, both of which had occurred during the Ambassador's absence.

Renunciation of Peace Process?

13. (C) Turning to the presidential election campaign, the Ambassador told the PM that the agreement that he had signed with the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to bring them into his electoral coalition had caught the attention of the international community. (Note: the agreement, signed September 8, calls, inter alia, for a complete renegotiation of the cease-fire agreement (CFA), a re-examination of the role of the Norwegian facilitators, insists on a "unitary" state and trashes the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) signed with the LTTE, but now entangled in court challenges to its constitutionality. The agreement also criticizes privatization in key economic sectors and promises to follow JVP economic policies. Over the weekend, the press published an acerbic letter to the PM from President Chandrika Bandanaraike Kumaratunga (CBK) in which she criticized Rajapakse for signing an agreement which, in her view, contradicted key SLFP tenets and policies. End Note) The Ambassador noted that, taken at face value, the agreement with the JVP would appear to be a complete renunciation of the ongoing peace process which has long enjoyed the support of the international community.

No Cause for Concern: "Just Words"

14. (C) The Prime Minister told the Ambassador that there should be no cause for concern since the agreement was "just words." Moreover, there had been translation inaccuracies from the signed Sinhala original into English. Rajapakse reviewed his long history of opposition to and district electoral victories over the JVP and told the Ambassador that he knew how to handle them and use them. In order to win the election, the PM said, JVP support was essential, and he knew from experience that the way to handle the JVP is to agree to whatever they want in order to get their support. "You must understand this is an election campaign. I want to win, so I need everyone." Moreover, Rajapakse concluded, there is nothing in the agreement he signed with the JVP that could be construed as not supporting the peace process. "I want peace."

Ambassador: "Words Matter"

15. (C) The Ambassador demurred and told Rajapakse that, for example, the call to renegotiate the CFA and the disavowal of the P-TOMS both could be seen as indications of a lack of faith in the peace

process and could, therefore, be used to stir up trouble by those opposed to a lasting peace agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Of course the PM wanted peace but it was also important to avoid the possibility of an "accidental return to war," fueled by incendiary campaign rhetoric. The international community, especially the co-chairs scheduled to meet in New York on September 19, would parse every word of the agreement. "Words matter," the Ambassador counseled.

16. (C) The Ambassador asked Rajapakse if, by signing the agreement, he wanted to see the Norwegian facilitators replaced. "No," replied Rajapakse. "Nobody else could do the job." The Ambassador suggested, in that case, that the PM issue a statement saying he thought the Norwegians and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) are doing a good job. "If I say that, I will lose the elections," Rajapakse replied, noting that "98 percent" of Southern voters believe the Norwegians are biased in favor of the LTTE. The PM told the Ambassador "I can one hundred percent guarantee you the peace process will continue" and cited as an example his public declaration that he will meet LTTE supremo Prabhakaran face-to-face if he wins. The Ambassador said that was a significant gesture but it is important to continue "step by step" progress on the ground and that the contents of the PM's pact with the JVP could easily complicate that task.

Bad Treatment by CBK

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17. (C) Rajapakse told the Ambassador that CBK's criticism of his JVP pact was unwarranted. After he was named the SLFP presidential candidate, he claimed, CBK had told him to do whatever necessary to clinch the support of both the JVP and the Buddhist JHU. "Now that I've done that, she criticizes me." He noted that he is at a disadvantage on peace process issues since CBK kept him in the dark on the subject ever since he became PM (Note: True enough. End Note) Nonetheless, he continued, he knows how to handle the JVP: agree to whatever they want in order to gain their support and win the election and then gradually turn them in a more moderate direction. (Comment: It is hard to say that this strategy succeeded after the SLFP signed an agreement with the JVP to form a coalition government in April 2004. End Comment)

The Economy and Non-Alignment

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18. (C) The Ambassador noted that the economic tenets of the JVP agreement seemed to endorse major steps backwards on economic reform and privatization. Rajapakse dismissed such concerns, noting that the agreement "endorses globalization" and only finds fault with privatization of key government entities. Asked about the agreement's endorsement of a "non-aligned" foreign policy, Rajapakse sputtered a bit about the need for Sri Lanka to "not be aligned exclusively with any foreign country." The Ambassador noted that the JVP's role models included Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez and Kim Jong Il, all representing countries that had done nothing to further Sri Lanka's development. The PM laughed off the Ambassador's comments, noting that the JVP, following a trip by several of its leaders to Japan, is "now more interested in Japan as a model."

"Trust Me"

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19. (C) Rajapakse concluded discussion of his pact with the JVP by stating, "I will deliver the goods. I come from the village and got here the hard way. Trust me. The peace process will continue." The Ambassador said he appreciated the words of reassurance but reiterated his suggestion that the PM make similar public assurances, especially to the international community.

Anti-conversion Bill "Dead"

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10. (C) As the meeting wrapped up, the Ambassador asked Rajapakse about the status of anti-conversion legislation. The PM waved his hand dismissively and said "it is still in the

Parliament but it is dead." He said he had told the Buddhist JHU party "to forget about it."

Comment

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11. (C) Rajapakse, more energetic and articulate than we've seen him, is supremely confident that he can control and manipulate the JVP to suit his electoral purposes. We hope he's right. The problem is that he seems oblivious to our point that "words matter" and that interested international partners (and, presumably, the LTTE) cannot help but read his pact with the JVP as a renunciation of the peace process and economic reform, even when viewed through the prism of electoral opportunism. Our counsel that "words matter" seemed to fall on deaf ears but we will continue to make it. At several points during the conversation Rajapakse also made clear his resentment of the Bandaranaiques, the manner in which they have treated him, and their presumption, as he sees it, that the SLFP is family property. End Comment  
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